

Standing Where the Buddha Stood

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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In all the passages where the Buddha describes his Awakening, he talks about first going through the different levels of jhana. Once he had stabilized his mind in good, solid, strong states of concentration, he directed it to insight – which means that the insights he got were the way experience looks from the point of view of someone in good, strong concentration. That's where all the terms, all the ideas and concepts come from. So if you want to understand the ideas and concepts, you have to put yourself in the same place.

This is why we spend so much time working on concentration: to get the mind in the right spot – centered in the fourth jhana, with bright awareness filling the whole body. The in-and-out breathing at that point is still. The mind is still. Breath energy still exists in the body, but the in-and-out breathing has calmed down and stopped. And you learn to stay there.

The issues that come up in the mind while you're learning to stay there: Those are the issues that shaped the Buddha's terminology. The concepts he used, say, about fabrication: What does fabrication look like to someone in good, solid concentration? The Buddha talks about three levels of fabrication: bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation; and then mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. As you move the mind through the levels of jhana, directed thought and evaluation get abandoned on the second level. That's where they grow still. Then bodily fabrication, the in-and-out breath, grows still in the fourth. What you've got left at that point are feelings and perceptions. These are the big issues, because as the Buddha pointed out, feelings are the basis for craving. When the mind is there in the fourth jhana, you can see this very clearly. The perceptions are what shape your awareness of what you're experiencing. You can see this fact clearly as well.

There are other passages where the Buddha talks about the formless levels, and each of them is based on the fourth jhana. You take the same equanimity, the same mindfulness you developed in the fourth jhana and simply change the perception.

So when you want to understand feeling or perception, this is the place to do it. Get the mind really well centered, and then you can watch these things as they affect the mind. You can see where they come from, where they go. You can see their allure, you can see their drawbacks. All the things you're supposed to see are best seen right here. When you divide things up in the mind before you hit this spot, it's like taking a knife and cutting across the grain, or cutting things up in whatever shapes you may want. You're not cutting them up from the right

perspective. And so you often misapply the terms, you misunderstand what the Buddha is getting at, because you're not in the same place where he was.

It's like taking a guidebook to Paris and then landing in Rome. You look around Rome and you try to identify all of the landmarks in Paris – this is a guidebook without pictures. You see a tall tower and tell yourself, "Well, that must be the Eiffel Tower." You see Saint Peter's and tell yourself, "That must be the Cathedral of Notre Dame." But you're looking from the wrong spot.

This is why the practice of good, strong concentration lies at the heart of the path. You're putting yourself in the Buddha's place. You're standing where the Buddha stood. That way you can learn in the same way that the Buddha learned.

There's passage in Richard Feynman where he says that the duty of every generation of scientists is to try to prove or disprove what has been handed down in the tradition. The same holds true in the practice of the Dhamma. We're here to prove or disprove what the Buddha taught. The way to do it is to follow his method. And this is his method: Get the mind centered. In the course of centering the mind, you develop good qualities: mindfulness, alertness, the ability to keep the mind with one frame of reference, without slipping off to other frames of reference. That's why mindfulness practice is such an important build-up to concentration practice.

The Buddha also says that you have to develop tranquility and powers of insight. Tranquility is developed by steadying the mind; insight, by investigating this process of fabrication. Concentration practice is a good place to see this, because you see different levels of fabrication falling away as the mind gets more and more still – and these are the important fabrications. The fact that trees and mountains are fabricated: That's their business, their issue. Our issue is the fabrications coming up in the mind: what they do to us, and what we do to them.

So you get the mind centered and start asking questions. Actually, as you've been centering it, you're already asking questions: Why is it that some days you follow a particular set of steps and they lead to one set of results, while the next day they lead to a different set of results? What did you do differently? Where will you look? Sometimes you have to look at where the mind is to begin with. And then you have to look at exactly how clearly you remember the series of steps you've followed, and how clearly you're aware of what you're doing right now, how honest are you with yourself. As the Buddha once said, that was the prerequisite for all Dhamma practice. "Give me a person who is honest," he said, "and I will teach that person the Dhamma." And he doesn't mean just being honest with the teacher. You have to be honest with yourself about what you're doing, what results you're getting.

Once the mind settles down and you're in this spot of being centered – with the breath still, with your awareness filling the body – there's a more refined level of questions to ask. This where you have to improvise. As the Buddha said, sometimes looking at things in terms of the five aggregates is what provides the important insights; sometimes you have to look in terms of the six sense spheres,

sometimes in terms of dependent co-arising, sometimes in terms of the six elements. You never know beforehand which kind of analysis is going to be right for you. You have to notice, as you're meditating, which kind of analysis you feel more of an affinity for, more of a rapport with. You've got to test it. You've got to play with these things. Some people don't like the word "play," because it doesn't sound serious enough, but all intelligence comes from the ability to improvise.

If you simply do what's in the books, you're not following the Buddha's method. The Buddha didn't follow what was in books. He had to use his own powers of ingenuity. We have the advantage that we're building on the discoveries he made, but we still have to go back and make those same discoveries for ourselves. We have to use the same method he used. And one element in that method is this ability to improvise.

Again, Richard Feynman: A British physicist who went to study with Feynman in Cornell was amazed by, on the one hand, how brilliant he was in physics, but also how playful he was. After a while he realized that the two were connected. If you don't learn to play around with ideas, you don't see new things. If you don't learn to play around with what's happening in the mind, you don't make any discoveries. The Buddha was the type of person who made discoveries. You have to make yourself the type of person who makes discoveries, even if it's simply to reconfirm what he discovered. You have to go through the same process, really testing things.

Ajaan Maha Boowa would often say: "Try to prove the Buddha wrong" – because it's only when you've done your best to prove him wrong that you can be sure that you've really proved him right. Otherwise there's always a possibility that you're simply programming your mind to think in a certain way. You tell yourself, "Ah, if you see there's no self, if you see that all things are empty, that must be Awakening." But that's not the case. You can't clone Awakening. It's always an unexpected discovery when it comes. It never comes quite the way you conceived it.

So even though the Buddha gave us his discoveries, and they've been passed down for all these generations, we have to keep re-proving them for ourselves, because we have to keep checking our understanding of what he had to say. All of the discoveries he tells us about are in words that we can look up in the dictionary. We can understand the words, but we're coming from ignorance, so our understanding of the words is an ignorant understanding. We can never be quite sure that we really understand what he had to say. If we really understood, things would open up. There'd be Awakening. But the fact that there's no Awakening yet means that we don't yet understand. So we have to keep testing things, trying new approaches to figure where we're still ignorant, where our blind spots still are. If you don't improvise, if you don't play, you don't see. The intelligence of a new discovery just doesn't happen.

So the important thing here is the method, and the heart of the method is how to get the mind centered in such a way that it's both still and alert, aware all around, with everything very still. See what the movements of the mind look like from that perspective. See how you can experiment with them from that perspective, asking the kinds of questions the Buddha recommends. Watch things arise, watch them pass away, look for what their allure is, what makes them attractive. Look for their drawbacks, look for their escape from them, the release from them.

The Buddha was confident enough in his method that he encouraged people to test it for themselves. "You can't go just by what your teacher says," he told the Kalamas. So when you're testing his teaching, make sure you've got the method right, and see if you can prove for yourself whether what the Buddha said was true: that there really is a deathless element, and that you really can achieve it through your own efforts.